

Visit to Water Schools Programme, Philippines, September 2010

by Lia Otterspeer (EMF/Valley Foundation)

The "Water Schools" Programme is an initiative of the Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC), Ecological Management Foundation (EMF) and the Valley Foundation. It is supported by UNICEF, the Norwegian Government and the World Bank. The aim of the programme is to help address the interlinking issues of education, health, water, hygiene and sanitation faced in faith schools, specifically in developing countries.

Worldwide, some 50% of the schools are run, managed or influenced by faiths - therefore the Water Schools Programme has enormous potential. Acting as a broker, Water Schools brings together faiths and secular water organisations in order to help implement low-cost sustainable solutions in faith schools. Poor health inevitably prevents children from attending school and, consequently they cannot complete their education. Many children also face walking long distances to fetch clean water. Menstruating girls in particular face challenges where adequate hygiene and sanitation facilities are not in place. By supplying fresh drinking water and good sanitation facilities, children's health is likely to be improved, enabling them to complete their education. Fewer school days will be missed if access to clean water is made available to families who need not rely on their children to collect it.

As part of Sr Mary Bellekom's role to develop and expand the Water Schools' faith networks, Mary was put in touch with the Catholic Educational Association of the Philippines (CEAP). They invited Nicki McHugh and Mary from the Water Schools team, and Lia Otterspeer, EMF to participate in their event. Given that the distance was so far from Europe, we decided to make best use of the time there. It was agreed that Lia would go into the country to visit some water projects before and after the CEAP event, and that Nicki and Mary would use their time to have meetings with the faith schools and representatives, NGOs and local government officials.

Just imagine that the Philippines consist of more than 7,000 islands: it was a great opportunity to visit three water projects on two islands. Just a pinpoint on the map, but a wonderful experience and adventure.

Monday, 20 September 2010

After having arrived Sunday in Cebu, I departed by fast ferry to the island of Bohol early in the morning. The trip lasted two and half hours. On arrival in the Port of Tagbilaran I was met by Nelia Licong and Fortunata Mission of the Women's Organization for Progress and Development of Guidalman (WOPD), both of whom are members of the board.

After a two-hour taxi journey we arrived at their office in Guildalman. It was planned that following lunch we would visit two water tanks connected to a spring higher up on the mountains. WomenforWater (www.womenforwater.org), Zijactief and Agtiterra have donated money to realise the water facilities with help from AquaforAll (www.aquaforall.nl).

Upon arrival at the first water tanks in Lungon, a village (barangay) in the mountains, the Water Committee, many women, children and even men were present, to give me a wonderful welcome with speeches, prayers and a song. They felt very thankful and pleased that a lady from Europe came to visit them in their village in the mountains. And I had to tell the reason why I came. I explained that I came because I would like to learn from their experience on their water project. I was very much moved by the reception and felt like a queen. People in the Philippines usually eat rice and on this occasion nice snacks were offered made of maize, which made the visit even more special.



After a short stay we continued our trip to another village (barangay) Pansul. Climbing up the tank, I could see it was almost empty - just a small water stream was in it. The reason for this was partly because of a long dry summer, partly because of water being used on the way down to the tank. One member of the Water Board suggested to replant trees around the tank again as many were cut down when the tanks were installed. This may be of help.



An Ecosan toilet had been built in both barangays, with financial help of ZijActief, WomenforWater and AquaforAll. The toilets were made with solid constructions of wood, which were contrary to the houses of bamboo where the people lived, sometimes with very nice mat-plaiting, but not very sustainable. The ecosan toilet will last approximately 10 years.



In early October a water expert, Henk de Jong, will visit Bohol on behalf of AquaforAll, ZijActief and Agriterra to help continue the update and improvement of the project.

In spite of cultural differences, ZijActief and WomenforWater would very much like the WOPD to intensify the water management. They have asked for knowledge to be shared on better hygiene, water education, maintenance, facilities, and use of Ecosan toilets, etc. They would also like advice on how to protect the water tanks from cattle, goats and water buffalos, which graze near the water tanks. The grazing pollutes the surroundings of the tanks and the water becomes contaminated with the e-coli virus.

At the end of my first day of travels, after having travelled some 37km on the back of a 'habal-habal' (a Philippine-style motorbike), I was very tired but happy to return to Guindalman.

Tuesday, 21 September

A morning meeting took place at the Center for Water Management of the Holy Name University in Tagbilaran. On the way we passed the Zoo in Pilar with two monkeys and the very tiny monkey, the Philippine Tarsier. We went to the "chocolate hills", so called because the hills look like round cocoa beans - not like a nice piece of dark chocolate! The natural world really looks beautiful here.

In the Philippines, it is customary for people to accompany guests to meetings. My landladies of WOPD joined me for the visit to the Holy Name University - and I felt very honoured to arrive with six people! But it was not a problem, and in the end it worked out very well as my landladies were guided around in the laboratory of the University. A very interesting and educational tour in the Philippines language. The reception was very welcome. We were introduced to the Fr Francisco Estepa, SVD, President and Research Director at the Holy Name University, and we exchanged information on the water project.

Contacts at the University were laid by Erwin van Overbeek, a friend of EMF since 2000. Erwin had been working on a water project in Carmen, a village near Tagbilaran, together with a 10 Dutch volunteers in 2008. The provision of the water does not seem to work well and contacts are very difficult at this moment. Unfortunately, I was not able to visit the Water Board of Carmen or to find out more about the difficulties. But returning to Holland, I met with Marjon Verkleij of ZijActief, and she suggested that Pepito (the only male member of

the Water Board of WOPD in Guildalman) might be a good person to investigate. We still have to wait for the outcome.

I have presented to all the Water Boards an example of the Peepoo bag: www.peepoople.com.

In the evening I went back by a delayed fast ferry, and I was very happy to find the car and Ms Florabel waiting for me at the port to take me back to Nicki and Mary at the hotel. Ms Florabel has kindly assisted us with all kind of requests during our stay. This was great and I am still very thankful for her help.

Wednesday, 22 September

Early wake up to attend the Eucharistic Celebration at the Cebu Cathedral by the Archbishop of Cebu, His Eminence Ricardo J. Cardinal Vidal, DD. After the celebration we were went to the "Waterfront Hotel" for the official opening of "A Heart for Eden, A Hand at Ecology" 2010 Convention where 2,748 delegates attended, representing 1,290 member schools. The ambiance was very quiet, respectful and above all, people were trying to really get in touch with each other exchanging stories, inviting us to visit their schools and so on.

This day I was at the table on one side with the director of the school in Cebu and this sister is a member of the oldest Congregation in the Philippines, since 1684, and another lady director of the University on Negros. This lady knew Armin Luistro very well and I offered the book "Water, the Blood of the Earth" by Allerd and asked her to give the book after reading to Armin Luistro. Hon.Br.Armin A. Luistro FSC, Ph.D, secretary of the department of Education of the republic of the Philippines representing the President of the Republic of the Philippines Benigno S. Aquino III and read his speech.

Of the many interesting speeches, there are two I wish to highlight: the keynote address of "A Heart for Eden, A Hand at Ecology" by Most Rev. Arturo M. Bastes on Eden and another one by Mr Oposa, a environmental lawyer on Negros.

In the evening I helped prepare the water schools questionnaires whilst Nicki and Mary incorporated their Cebu experiences into their presentations.

Thursday, 23 September

Preparations took place for the workshop. Nicki and Mary shared the morning session with the Dutch Father Van Engelen, University of San Carlos. He gave a very good lecture on the "Water Cycle". One of his assistants had studied 2 years in Delft, and she has been in the Haarlemmermeer on an exchange visit: the sister City of Cebu. This was remarkable because I live the Haarlemmermeer. Nicki and Mary's talk on the Schools' Best Practices was very well received with requests afterwards for further collaboration.

In the afternoon Nicki and Mary shared their presentation session with Fr Margarito Alingasa, President of Cebu for Sustainable Water Foundation, who just returned from SIWI in Stockholm. Mary and Nicki presented on the Water Schools Programme and again, we had a good attendance and extremely positive response to the programme.



Following Nicki and Mary's talk I was approached by a sister who asked for help with a water problem on her island. She told me the mountain water no longer reaches the sea because of salination of the land. Remarkably, she told me that after re-planting trees around water storage areas at her school and convent, the storages were now storing water again – and compared it to the miracle of Jesus turning water into wine.

Nicki and Mary were also invited to speak on the last day of the convention, to the 2,784 delegates on the Water Schools and Green Plans for Faiths Programmes. Unfortunately I could not join as I had a meeting on the island of Negros in Bacolod next morning. But Nicki and Mary received an enthusiastic response. They also used the opportunity to distribute the water schools questionnaire and leaflets on both programmes.

See also <http://waterschools.wordpress.com>

Friday, 24 September 2010.

I flew from Cebu to Bacolod and was met by Auke Idzenga of AIDFI.

Ramp pumps bring 'water uphill'

I spent the day visiting the Dutch innovator Auke Idzenga, in Bacolod, on the island of Negros. Auke, a very dedicated engineer, has been working on safe water projects in the Philippines since 1979. Amongst other inventions, Auke created the RAM pump which can bring water uphill for mountain villages (www.aidfi.org), which won the prestigious World Challenge 10 competition in December 2010. AIDFI installed six pumps for mountain villages in Anangue near Bacolod donated by the Australian Embassy in the Philippines. There are between 40 and 60 families living in the villages. In the villages water boards are chosen and the boards take decisions on the distribution and prices to be paid for the water. The pumps supply up hill fresh water via pipelines to tanks and further on to one tap point in the villages. This means that women and children no longer have to walk down the mountains to collect water – or indeed they no longer have to carry water walking back up the mountains on very bad paths, many of which are unpaved and unsafe. As a result of the RAM pumps, women are able to grow vegetables, which they can sell, and children can spend more time at school.

On the island of Negros, children walk between 3-5 kms each way for school. The Water Boards are making plans to try and set up one common school for 6 villages in the mountain, so that the children only have to walk an average of one and half km for school. If this plan could be realised, this would be another big step forward for the people of the villages.

AIDFI is one of 12 finalists who have been selected for “The World Challenge” Campaign (www.theworldchallenge.co.uk). BBC World News will show a documentary of the RAM pump installation in the mountain villages on 6 November: from 09.30-10.00 hours and 15.30-16.00. It will be shown again on 7 November from 22.30-23.00. Voting takes place between 27 September and 12 November.

Saturday 25th September: I flew home.

Having travelled a lot, having met so many nice people, saw wonderful nature, visiting the CEAP conference and water projects, I realise again that we in the Western countries live in abundance, have money, have food, can afford so many things and - most of all - we can make choices. Living in developing countries life can be so difficult, people have to work so hard just to be able to get their daily water and rice, and sometimes they cannot afford to make choices.

I am very thankful for the opportunity to have had a view in the life of the very kind, helpful and hospitable people of the Philippines, who know to share what they have.

And I am very thankful to my British colleagues Mrs Nicki McHugh and Sister Mary Bellekom for their company, to Mrs Florabel Lim for her assistance during the visit, and to Allerd Stikker, Chairman of the Valley Foundation, who made my visit possible.